

Omens Are Muffled

By Tom Wicker

WASHINGTON—Probably nothing happened on Election Day, 1973, that was half as important politically as what happened the day after. That was when the House of Representatives, with four votes to spare, overrode Richard Nixon's veto of the war powers bill.

That legislation may yet prove to be a faulty piece of work; but in the aftermath of the Southeast Asia war—if aftermath is the word for a war still going on—it was important for Congress to take a strong stand against war by Presidential fiat; and it was equally significant, in the short run, that it should have been on this issue that the House mustered the votes to override a Nixon veto for the first time this year.

The war powers bill, after all, attempts to deal with one of the gravest of constitutional questions, and for the first time in history. It goes directly to the hitherto untouchable powers of the President as Commander in Chief. It is a specific limitation—at least, it's intended to be—of Richard Nixon's specific powers. That the House could override his veto of such a measure says better than any Gallup poll how much Mr. Nixon's political strength has been eroded, and that the House has sensed a swiftly changing public attitude toward the imperial Presidency.

On the other hand, political buffs will have to sift through the election evidence with a microscope to find mud trace of Watergate and its attendant scandals in the returns. Only in New Jersey, which had had its own corruption headlines, does there seem to have been much anti-Republican fallout; even there, the Republican candidate for Governor was so hopeful that it is hard to measure how much bigger Watergate might have made the landslide against him.

taken together, the House override on the election returns tend to confirm those Republicans like National Chairman George Bush who have been bravely insisting that the scandal will not hurt the party but only the individuals involved. But the evidence is too sketchy for Republicans running next year to take much comfort.

A few other conclusions may be drawn, if tentatively, from Tuesday's returns:

¶The "cop era" in politics may be coming to a close. It opened, more or less, when a detective named Charles Stenvig was elected Mayor of Minneapolis in 1969, occasioning much lugubrious political analysis. This year, he was turned out of office. A former police commissioner was defeated for Mayor of Detroit, and down in Phila-

IN THE NATION

delphia, candidates backed by Mayor Frank Rizzo, the most ominous ex-cop, were defeated. Ex-cop Mario Biaggi ran fourth in the four-man New York mayoralty race.

¶The South's swing to the Republican party continued, with the election of Mills Godwin as Governor of Virginia. But since he used to be a Harry Byrd Democrat, since his opponent used to be a maverick Democrat but ran as an independent, and since a dozen other independents won legislative seats, the Virginia election really tended to confirm the continuing decline of party loyalties and party strength, in the South as elsewhere.

¶Mr. Bush professed to find signs of voter antipathy to incumbents; in fact, that may more nearly have been part of a growing antipathy to politicians, or at least to people who look, sound and talk like politicians. This trend has been around for some time, and Watergate has no doubt pushed it along. The net result is likely to be a new political-public relations industry dedicated to teaching politicians not to look, sound or talk like politicians.

¶Black candidates, notably by winning mayoralty races in Detroit, Raleigh, N. C., Dayton, Ohio, and Grand Rapids, Mich., continued to break down barriers to executive office—if so far only in municipal and county elections.

¶The two leading Republican Presidential candidates (according to Dr. Gallup), Ronald Reagan of California and Nelson Rockefeller of New York were rebuffed in those states by voters who declined Mr. Reagan's tax-limitation proposal and Mr. Rockefeller's latest transportation bond issue.

Neither Governor, however, is badly enough hurt to drop out of Presidential competition; probably nothing could hurt either that badly. The transportation setback, however, might be the final push needed to determine Mr. Rockefeller against running for a fifth term as Governor. It may help him decide, as Mr. Reagan already has, that getting to Washington would be easier without the political and administrative problems of a big state to weigh him down or trip him up.

There was also proof in the 1973 elections, as there usually is, that the more things change, the more they stay the same, to wit: Voters in North Carolina defeated a liquor-by-the-drink proposal, alas; and voters in Boston returned Louise Day Hicks to the City Council, alas, alas.